

Arts

Ken Maiuri's Clubland: Whoa! This vibraphonist plays with old-school flair

Monday, October 17, 2016

A vibraphone is a stationary object, but the expressive Warren Chiasson plays it with full-bodied flourishes and old-school flair.

And when the heavy instrument suddenly became mobile, rolling and tumbling off the stage in the middle of one of his solos, it was just a hiccup in his exciting set at the Northampton Jazz Workshop at Spare Time Northampton's City Sports Grille this past Tuesday night.

The beginning of the night was less chaotic. The 82-year-old master vibraphonist stood stoically on stage while emcee and pianist Paul Arslanian rattled off some of Chiasson's impressive resume, which included stints with George Shearing, Chet Baker, Roberta Flack, B.B. King and others. And now he was about to play with the house trio at a bowling alley.

"He's finally made it. This is the pinnacle of many people's careers," the amiable Arslanian joked to the audience of about 70 people.

But anyone familiar with the local threesome (which also features George Kaye on bass and Jon Fisher on drums) knows its advanced level of internal ESP and musicianship, and it was a thrill to watch them deftly react to Chiasson's curveballs and conducting throughout the eight-song set.

Wearing a red T-shirt under a navy suit jacket, the vibraphonist was an authoritative player, who sometimes punctuated his solos with a shout of "Whoa!" He'd jab a mallet in the air to direct a song's flow, or swing around and



Warren Chiasson plays the vibraphone with full-bodied flourishes at the Northampton Jazz Workshop at Spare Time Northampton's City Sports Grille Oct. 11, 2016. Herb Scher

point emphatically when he wanted one of the trio to solo, the back of his suit jacket flapping like a cape.

Chiasson, born and raised in Nova Scotia, was an early pioneer in the four-mallet technique, in which a musician holds two mallets in each hand, gripped like Xs, allowing the person to create richer harmonic movement, like a pianist rather than a horn player.

He headed to New York City in 1959 and almost immediately began playing with George Shearing — in fact Chiasson's first gig with him, at the Newport Jazz Festival on July 2, 1959, can be heard and purchased cheaply on the Wolfgang's Vault website (which the vibraphonist announced at the show, still amazed that a recording of it exists).

Chiasson began the evening with his own arrangement of the Brazilian bossa nova jazz standard "The Girl from Ipanema," which he created while on tour in Lima, Peru.

His robust style was on full display right away, coaxing sounds both smooth and rough out of his percussive instrument, from dreamy pillowy shimmering waves to hard bell tones. He finished the song with a big dramatic move, hammering the mallets wildly on the instrument's bars. As the audience applauded, he looked out at the room like a focused fighter back in his corner after a victorious round.

He led the band through two songs from his 1978 album "Good Vibes for Kurt Weill," including "Speak Low" (which closed the set) and a version of "Mack the Knife" that spun through the melody in all 12 keys. Chiasson's song-ending solo snuck in some wild hits, a short sharp symphony of metallic pings, like the insides of an action-packed pinball machine.

Duke Ellington and Juan Tizol's "Caravan" was the manic and exciting highlight of the night, with Fisher's drums hiccuping a steady rhythm underneath the snaky melody. During the vibraphone solo, Arslanian raised up off his piano bench, head jittering while he peered over the piano at Chiasson, so as not to miss the quick signal for when the careening train was going to jump over to his track.

Chiasson's face glowed silver-blue under the stage lighting, and during his last solo of the song, in between short phrases, he'd straighten up and give the crowd the eye, like a mallet-wielding Robert De Niro.

Introducing another tune, Chiasson explained how he'd worked with George Shearing for a total of five years (divided between the 1960s and 1970s) and said he still has original copies of the bass charts for some of Shearing's classics. "I treat them like holy scripture," he said, comparing them to the works of Bach.

He and the trio played one, "East of the Sun (and West of the Moon)," which worked as the calm after the storm of "Caravan." In the back of the room a mom danced with her child, the stroller parked nearby. Chiasson ended the song with a grand sweep of his right arm and a little hop.

He handed over the stage to Arslanian for a trio spotlight (they played their variation on the standard "It Can Happen To You"), and then Chiasson took a solo turn on Bill Evans' lovely classic "Waltz for Debby."

Halfway through the tune I glanced down at my notebook for a second and looked up just as the vibraphone was suddenly falling off the stage. Multiple people with mega-fast reflexes jumped up to avert total disaster as microphones tumbled over at cockeyed angles. Once everything was back in place and the vibraphone's wheels were securely locked, a cool and composed Chiasson finished the tune.

Arslanian stepped aside for Agawam pianist Jim Argiro, a friend of Chiasson's and a player well-versed in Shearing's signature arrangements, inviting him up to sit in on "Lullaby of Birdland."

Immediately following the very last hit of the song, Chiasson theatrically raised in arms in triumph — and knocked one of the microphones over. His energy could not be contained!

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